

From Behavioural Confusion to Meaning Reconstruction: Parenting Experiences of Children with ADHD in Tianjin, China

Lin Xiuqin¹ & Mohd Mursyid Arshad²

¹Department of Educational Psychology, Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra
Malaysia, 43400 UPM Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia, ²Department of Professional
Development and Continuing Education, Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra
Malaysia, 43400 UPM Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia
Corresponding Author Email: GS74052@student.upm.edu.my

DOI Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v16-i9/28905>

Published Date: 15 September 2026

Abstract

This study explores the experiences of parents raising children with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in Tianjin, China, with particular attention to the challenges they encounter and the coping strategies they develop. A qualitative case study design was employed to examine the experiences of four parents of children diagnosed with ADHD. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using thematic analysis. Four main themes emerged from the data: behavioural confusion and the development of understanding, social expectations and family pressures, parenting stress and family burden, and adaptation and coping strategies. The findings indicate that parents initially experienced uncertainty and confusion when interpreting their children's behaviours, often attributing difficulties to disobedience or inadequate parenting. Following diagnosis and increased access to ADHD-related knowledge, parents gradually reconstructed their understanding of their children's behaviours and adopted more adaptive parenting approaches. Parents also reported emotional stress, family pressures, and concerns about social judgement. Over time, information seeking, emotional adjustment, family support, and changes in parenting strategies helped parents adapt to their children's needs. The findings highlight the importance of culturally sensitive family support and accessible ADHD-related education for parents.

Keywords: Adhd, Parenting Experiences, Parental Stress, Coping Strategies, Meaning Reconstruction

Introduction

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) has become an increasingly important concern within educational and developmental research due to its significant influence on children's learning experiences, social participation, and family relationships. As one of the

most common neurodevelopmental conditions affecting children and adolescents, ADHD is characterised by persistent difficulties in attention regulation, impulsivity, emotional regulation, and executive functioning.(Bunford et al., 2015; Shaw et al., 2014) These challenges may influence not only children's academic performance and behavioural adjustment but also their interactions with families, peers, and educational environments. Therefore, understanding ADHD requires attention not only to children's symptoms but also to the broader family and social contexts in which development occurs.

However, the impact of ADHD extends beyond children themselves and has important implications for family wellbeing. Increasing attention within family and educational research has highlighted that parents play a central role in supporting children's development and managing the challenges associated with neurodevelopmental differences. Parents of children with ADHD often experience elevated levels of parenting stress due to behavioural management demands, academic concerns, and uncertainty regarding their children's future development(Johnston & Mash, 2001; Theule et al., 2013, 2018).Although quantitative studies have provided valuable evidence regarding parental stress and psychological outcomes, they may not fully capture how parents interpret these experiences, negotiate their parenting roles, and adapt to everyday challenges.

In addition, existing research has demonstrated that children with ADHD may encounter difficulties in peer relationships due to impulsive behaviours, emotional sensitivity, and developmental differences(Hoza, 2007; Mikami et al., 2010). While behavioural interventions, parental education, and professional support have been shown to improve outcomes for children and families (Faraone et al., 2021), much of the existing literature remains focused on symptoms, treatment effectiveness, and measurable outcomes.

These family experiences may vary across cultural contexts because parenting expectations, educational values, and social perceptions influence how parents understand and respond to children's developmental difficulties. In China, where children's academic achievement and behavioural performance are often closely associated with family responsibility, parents of children with ADHD may experience additional pressures related to educational expectations, social judgement, and concerns about their children's future development.

Therefore, limited qualitative research has examined how Chinese parents experience the process of raising children with ADHD, particularly how they interpret their children's behaviours, negotiate parenting responsibilities, and respond to challenges within their social and cultural environments. A deeper understanding of these lived experiences is needed to inform culturally responsive educational and family support approaches.

Building on this research gap, the present study aims to explore the lived experiences of Chinese parents raising children with ADHD. Specifically, it examines how parents understand developmental and behavioural challenges, experience parenting-related stress, and develop coping strategies within the context of Chinese educational expectations and family values and social perceptions of ADHD.

Rather than viewing ADHD parenting experiences as a direct consequence of children's behavioural symptoms alone, this study conceptualises parenting experiences as a dynamic

process shaped by interactions among developmental challenges, family stress, cultural expectations, and adaptive responses. From this perspective, parents are not only individuals experiencing difficulties but also active participants who continuously interpret their children's needs, reconstruct their understanding of ADHD, and develop strategies to support their children's development. This perspective provides a more comprehensive understanding of ADHD parenting experiences within the Chinese educational and cultural context.

Problem Statement

Although ADHD has received increasing attention in educational and psychological research, existing studies have primarily focused on children's symptoms, behavioural difficulties, academic performance, and intervention outcomes. While this knowledge has contributed to improving identification and intervention strategies, it provides limited understanding of how families experience the ongoing demands associated with raising children with ADHD. Consequently, educational and support practices may overlook the emotional, relational, and cultural factors that influence how parents respond to ADHD-related challenges.

Parents of children with ADHD often face complex emotional, educational, and social challenges. Beyond managing children's behavioural difficulties, parents may experience uncertainty regarding their children's future development, difficulties in accessing appropriate support, and pressure arising from social expectations and educational demands. However, these experiences cannot be fully understood through quantitative measurements alone, as parental experiences involve personal interpretations, emotional responses, family interactions, and cultural meanings.

Furthermore, limited qualitative research has examined the experiences of Chinese parents raising children with ADHD. This limitation is significant because parenting experiences are shaped by cultural beliefs, educational expectations, and social interpretations of children's behaviours. In the Chinese context, where academic achievement and behavioural discipline are often closely connected with perceptions of parental responsibility, ADHD-related difficulties may create additional emotional and social pressures for families.

Therefore, this study addresses the need for a contextualised understanding of parental experiences by exploring how parents in Tianjin, China experience, interpret, and cope with the challenges of raising children with ADHD. By examining these experiences through a qualitative case study approach, the study aims to contribute to educational research by revealing how family stress, cultural expectations, and adaptive processes interact within the Chinese context.

Research Questions

Based on the identified research gap, this study focuses on exploring the lived experiences of parents raising children with ADHD within the Chinese educational and cultural context. Although previous research has provided important knowledge regarding ADHD symptoms, interventions, and parenting stress, limited attention has been given to how Chinese parents understand, experience, and cope with the challenges of raising children with ADHD in their everyday lives.

Therefore, this study aims to address the following research questions:

1. What challenges do parents experience when raising children with ADHD in Tianjin, China?
2. What coping strategies do parents use to manage the challenges associated with raising children with ADHD?

These research questions are designed to explore both the difficulties faced by parents and the ways in which they adapt to and support their children's development within their family and educational contexts.

Literature Review

ADHD and Developmental Challenges

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is one of the most common neurodevelopmental disorders affecting children and adolescents worldwide. It is characterised by persistent patterns of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity that interfere with children's academic performance, social relationships, and everyday functioning. Beyond these core symptoms, children with ADHD frequently experience difficulties related to executive functioning, emotional regulation, and behavioural control (Bunford et al., 2015; Shaw et al., 2014), which may influence their interactions with family members, peers, and educational environments.

Previous research has primarily focused on understanding ADHD from a clinical and developmental perspective, examining symptom characteristics, diagnosis, and intervention outcomes. While this body of research has contributed significantly to knowledge about ADHD, increasing attention has been given to the broader impact of ADHD on family experiences. Children's behavioural difficulties often create additional demands for parents, requiring continuous supervision, emotional support, and adjustment of parenting strategies. However, the presence of ADHD symptoms alone does not fully explain parents' experiences. Parents' interpretations of their children's behaviours, available resources, social expectations, and cultural beliefs all influence how families respond to ADHD-related challenges. Therefore, examining parental lived experiences provides important insight into how ADHD is understood and managed within everyday family contexts.

Although existing research has significantly advanced understanding of ADHD as a neurodevelopmental condition, the dominant focus on symptoms, diagnosis, and intervention outcomes provides limited insight into how families experience and interpret these challenges in everyday contexts. In particular, understanding ADHD only from a child-centred perspective may overlook the relational and cultural processes through which parents make sense of their children's behaviours. Therefore, examining parental experiences provides an important complementary perspective for understanding ADHD within real-life family environments.

Parenting Experiences and Family Burden

Raising a child with ADHD can create substantial emotional and practical challenges for parents (Johnston & Mash, 2001; Theule et al., 2013, 2018). Previous studies have consistently reported elevated levels of parenting stress among families of children with ADHD, often associated with children's behavioural difficulties, academic problems, and emotional regulation challenges (Theule et al., 2013, 2018). Parents may experience frustration,

uncertainty, exhaustion, and concerns regarding their children's future development(Johnston & Mash, 2001; Theule et al., 2013).

Although existing research has identified parenting stress as an important consequence of ADHD, many studies have focused primarily on measuring stress levels or examining relationships between ADHD symptoms and parental psychological outcomes. Such approaches provide valuable information regarding the prevalence and severity of parental difficulties but provide limited understanding of how parents experience, interpret, and negotiate these challenges in their daily lives.

Furthermore, parenting experiences involve more than stress alone. Families must continuously adjust their expectations, develop new understandings of ADHD, and identify effective ways to support their children. Therefore, parental experiences should be understood as an evolving process involving both vulnerability and adaptation.

However, conceptualising parenting stress primarily as an outcome of ADHD symptoms may oversimplify the complexity of family experiences. Parents do not simply respond to children's difficulties; they actively interpret behaviours, negotiate expectations, and reconstruct their parenting approaches over time. Therefore, qualitative exploration is necessary to understand how stress is produced, experienced, and transformed within specific family and cultural contexts.

Social and Cultural Context of ADHD Parenting in China

Parenting experiences are shaped by broader social and cultural environments. In China, children's academic achievement, behavioural performance, and future success are often closely connected with perceptions of family responsibility(Chao, 1994; Fung & Lau, 2010; Shek, 2006). Consequently, parents of children with ADHD may experience additional pressure when their children encounter difficulties in school, peer relationships, or social interactions(Hoza, 2007; Mikami et al., 2010).

Previous research has suggested that Chinese parents may experience unique challenges related to social judgement, limited public understanding of ADHD, and concerns regarding stigma. Behavioural difficulties associated with ADHD may sometimes be interpreted as inadequate parenting, poor discipline, or lack of effort, increasing parental feelings of guilt and responsibility.

At the same time, Chinese families often place strong emphasis on educational achievement and parental involvement in children's development(Chao, 1994; Chuang & Tamis-LeMonda, 2013). These cultural expectations may influence how parents interpret ADHD, seek support, and make decisions regarding intervention and parenting strategies(Fung & Lau, 2010; Chuang & Tamis-LeMonda, 2013).

Although international research has explored family experiences of ADHD, less is known about how Chinese parents construct meaning around ADHD within their specific cultural and educational context. Understanding these experiences requires attention not only to children's symptoms but also to the social expectations and family relationships surrounding ADHD.

Nevertheless, much of the existing knowledge regarding ADHD parenting has been developed within Western contexts, where educational expectations, family structures, and support systems may differ from those in China. Consequently, findings from previous research may not fully explain how Chinese parents interpret ADHD-related behaviours, experience social judgement, or negotiate responsibilities within culturally specific expectations of parenting and education.

Coping, Adaptation, and the Family Stress Model

This study adopts the Family Stress Model (FSM) developed by McCubbin and Patterson (1983) as a conceptual framework for understanding parental experiences of raising children with ADHD. The main components of the model and their application to the present study are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Conceptual Framework Guiding the Study: Family Stress Model Applied to Chinese Parents Raising Children with ADHD

Family Stress Model Component	Theoretical Explanation	Application to ADHD Parenting Context	Corresponding Themes in This Study
Child-related stressors	Stress may originate from characteristics or difficulties experienced by the child, including inattention, impulsivity, emotional dysregulation, and behavioural difficulties, which create additional demands for family members.	Children's ADHD-related symptoms, including inattention, impulsivity, emotional dysregulation, and behavioural difficulties, increase daily parenting demands.	Theme 1: Developmental and Behavioural Challenges
Family and social demands	Child-related challenges may influence family functioning and create difficulties in social relationships and daily interactions.	Parents experience challenges related to children's peer relationships, school adjustment, and social acceptance. These difficulties are influenced by cultural expectations and social perceptions of children's behaviour.	Theme 2: Social and Interpersonal Difficulties
Parenting stress and family burden	Continuous demands may contribute to emotional strain, psychological stress, and reduced family wellbeing.	Parents experience exhaustion, uncertainty, frustration, self-blame, and concerns regarding children's future development. Stress is shaped by both ADHD-related difficulties and Chinese cultural expectations of parenting responsibility.	Theme 3: Parenting Stress and Family Burden
Coping resources	Families may reduce stress through available resources, including knowledge, social support, and professional assistance.	Parents seek ADHD-related information, psychological support, counselling services, and communication with educators or professionals to better understand and support their children.	Theme 4: Adaptation and Coping Strategies
Family adaptation	Through coping processes, families gradually reconstruct meanings, adjust expectations, and develop adaptive responses.	Parents move from confusion and self-blame towards acceptance, understanding, and more effective parenting approaches.	Overall Integration of Findings

The Family Stress Model suggests that family stress emerges through interactions among stressors, family demands, available resources, and adaptation processes (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). Later developments of family stress theory further emphasise that families

actively adapt to stressful circumstances through available resources, meaning-making processes, and relational adjustments (Boss, 2002; Patterson, 2002).

The Family Stress Model is particularly relevant for the present study because it moves beyond viewing parental stress as a direct consequence of children's difficulties. Instead, it explains family experiences as a dynamic process involving stressors, available resources, interpretations, and adaptation. This perspective aligns with the aim of the present study to explore how Chinese parents experience challenges associated with ADHD and gradually develop adaptive responses within their social and cultural environments.

The framework highlights that ADHD parenting experiences develop through interactions among child-related stressors, family demands, coping resources, and adaptation. In this study, the model provides a lens for understanding how Chinese parents interpret challenges and develop adaptive responses within their cultural context.

Research Gap and Rationale for the Present Study

Although previous research has provided important knowledge regarding ADHD symptoms, parenting stress, and intervention outcomes, several limitations remain. First, much existing research has relied on quantitative approaches, which have contributed to understanding the relationship between ADHD characteristics and parental stress but have provided limited insight into parents' subjective experiences and meaning-making processes.

Second, although international studies have examined family experiences of ADHD, relatively limited qualitative research has explored how Chinese parents experience raising children with ADHD within their specific cultural and educational environment. In particular, insufficient attention has been given to how parents interpret their children's behaviours, negotiate parenting responsibilities, experience social pressures, and develop coping strategies.

However, the significance of examining Chinese parents' experiences extends beyond the geographical limitation of previous research. In the Chinese cultural context, parenting is often closely associated with responsibility for children's academic achievement, behavioural development, and future success. Therefore, ADHD-related challenges may not only create practical difficulties for families but may also influence parents' perceptions of responsibility, identity, and self-evaluation. Exploring these culturally embedded experiences can provide a deeper understanding of how parenting stress and adaptation are constructed within specific social contexts.

Third, existing research has often examined parenting stress and coping strategies as separate concepts. Less attention has been given to understanding how challenges, stress, and adaptation interact as part of a continuous family process.

Therefore, this study addresses not only an empirical gap but also a conceptual gap in understanding ADHD parenting experiences. By adopting a qualitative case study approach guided by the Family Stress Model, the study examines how developmental challenges, social difficulties, parenting stress, and coping strategies interact as part of an ongoing process of

family adaptation. This approach provides insight into how Chinese parents construct meaning around ADHD within their specific educational and cultural context.

Without understanding this process, existing interventions may overlook the emotional, cultural, and relational factors that influence how families respond to ADHD-related challenges.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore the lived experiences of parents raising children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in Tianjin, China. A qualitative approach was selected because the purpose of this study was to understand parents' personal experiences, perceptions, challenges, and coping strategies within their real-life family and educational contexts.

Although phenomenological research could provide insight into individuals' lived experiences, the present study adopted a qualitative case study design because the aim was not only to describe parents' subjective experiences but also to examine how these experiences were shaped by the broader Chinese educational and cultural context. A case study approach therefore allows investigation of ADHD parenting as a contextualised phenomenon embedded within real-life family environments.

Previous research has provided valuable knowledge regarding ADHD symptoms, parenting stress, and intervention approaches. However, quantitative approaches may not fully capture the complex emotional experiences, personal interpretations, and contextual factors involved in parenting children with ADHD. Therefore, a qualitative approach was considered appropriate for exploring how parents understand ADHD-related challenges and how they develop strategies to support their children.

A case study design was employed because it enables an in-depth investigation of a specific phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2018). In this study, the case refers to the experiences of parents raising children with ADHD within the Chinese educational and cultural environment. This design allows exploration of how family relationships, educational expectations, and social perceptions influence parents' experiences and coping processes. The Family Stress Model informed the development of the research questions and provided a conceptual lens for interpreting parents' lived experiences.

Participants and Sampling

The participants in this study were four parents of children diagnosed with ADHD in Tianjin, China. Purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants because parents with direct experience of raising children with ADHD were considered the most appropriate sources of information for addressing the research questions.

The participants were selected based on their relevant experiences and willingness to share their perspectives regarding ADHD parenting. Their experiences provided insights into different aspects of parenting challenges, including emotional difficulties, educational concerns, family interactions, and coping strategies.

Given the exploratory and bounded nature of this qualitative case study, the purpose of participant selection was not statistical representation but the generation of rich and contextualised understanding. Although the sample consisted of four participants, their detailed accounts provided valuable insights into recurring patterns of ADHD parenting experiences, including behavioural challenges, family stress, and adaptation processes within the specific context of Tianjin, China.

The sample size was considered appropriate for this bounded qualitative case study because the focus was on depth of understanding rather than breadth of representation.

Table 2

Participant Demographic Information

Participant	Age	Occupation	Number Children	of Child Diagnosed with ADHD
P1	38	Financial Self-Media Editor	1	Boy, 10 years old
P2	40	Junior High School English Teacher	1	Boy, 8 years old
P3	42	Geological Engineer	2	Boy, 14 years old
P4	43	Network Editor in a State-Owned Enterprise	1	Girl, 8 years old

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the participants. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they allowed participants to describe their experiences in their own words while enabling the researcher to explore specific areas related to the research questions.

The interview questions focused on parents' understanding of ADHD, challenges encountered in daily parenting, experiences related to children's education, emotional responses, family relationships, and coping strategies. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed accurately for further analysis.

During the analysis process, the researcher continuously compared emerging codes and categories across interviews. Data collection was considered adequate when additional interviews provided confirmation of existing patterns rather than substantially generating new themes related to the research questions.

Data Analysis

The collected interview data were analysed using thematic analysis. This approach was selected because it provides a systematic process for identifying, organising, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The analysis involved several stages, including repeated reading of transcripts, initial coding, identification of meaningful categories, development of themes, and interpretation of findings in relation to the research questions. Through this process, the study identified

common patterns across participants' experiences while also recognising individual differences in how parents understood and responded to ADHD-related challenges.

Given the exploratory nature of this qualitative case study, data collection focused on obtaining sufficiently rich and detailed accounts relevant to the research questions.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, the researcher maintained a systematic data analysis process, including careful transcription, repeated review of interview data, and consistent coding procedures. These processes helped ensure that the identified themes accurately reflected participants' experiences.

Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, confidentiality arrangements, and their right to withdraw at any time. Informed consent was obtained before data collection. Participants' identities were protected through the use of pseudonyms, and all personal information was kept confidential.

Due to the sensitive nature of discussing children's developmental difficulties and family experiences, interviews were conducted with respect and consideration for participants' emotional wellbeing.

Findings

Overview of Findings

The findings were organised around two research questions, identifying both parenting challenges and adaptive strategies reported by participants.

Thematic analysis of four parental interviews revealed that raising children with ADHD was experienced as a dynamic process involving continuous negotiation between children's developmental difficulties, family demands, social expectations, and parental adaptation. Rather than experiencing ADHD-related challenges as isolated behavioural problems, parents described a gradual transformation in how they interpreted their children's behaviours and understood their own parenting roles.

Four interconnected themes were generated from the data: (1) From behavioural confusion to developmental understanding, (2) Negotiating social expectations and family pressures, (3) Experiencing parenting stress while maintaining family responsibility, and (4) Reconstructing parenting approaches through learning and adaptation.

Across these themes, parents' experiences reflected a movement from uncertainty and emotional burden towards greater acceptance and adaptive responses. The findings suggest that parental adaptation was not an immediate consequence of diagnosis but an ongoing developmental process shaped by knowledge acquisition, family interactions, and changes in parental interpretation.

Theme 1: From Behavioural Confusion to Developmental Understanding

A prominent finding across participants was that parents initially struggled to understand why their children displayed behaviours that appeared inconsistent with age-related expectations. Before developing knowledge about ADHD, several parents interpreted these behaviours as reflecting insufficient effort, poor discipline, or ineffective parenting.

For example, one parent described her early confusion regarding her daughter's difficulty following instructions:

"She appeared as if she was refusing to follow instruction."

(Spring, Interview)

This account illustrates that the child's behaviour was initially interpreted through a parenting framework rather than a developmental framework. The parent questioned her own parenting style and considered whether excessive tolerance had contributed to the child's difficulties.

Similarly, another parent described difficulties in understanding her child's procrastination and problems with task completion:

"He actually knows what he should do, but he just does not want to take action."

(Yao Wei, Interview)

Although the behaviour appeared intentional from the parent's perspective, further reflection led the parent to recognise that the child experienced difficulties translating intentions into actions:

"He is not resisting me. He is actually struggling with himself. He knows he should do it, but he simply cannot make himself take action."

(Yao Wei, Interview)

This change in interpretation represented an important turning point in parents' experiences. Rather than viewing children's behaviours as deliberate resistance, parents gradually developed an understanding that ADHD-related difficulties involved challenges with self-regulation, attention control, and executive functioning.

Another participant similarly described how diagnosis changed her understanding of her child:

"After taking him for an assessment and receiving a diagnosis, I was able to understand him better. I realised that he was not doing these things intentionally."

(Wang, Interview)

Parents described diagnosis as an important turning point in understanding their children's behaviours. After receiving professional explanations about ADHD, they gradually developed alternative interpretations of their children's actions and became more aware that these behaviours were related to developmental difficulties rather than intentional refusal.

Over time, parents reported adjusting their expectations and parenting approaches according to their children's individual developmental characteristics. For example, one participant explained that although her child was nine years old, her psychological maturity was closer to

that of a younger child. This change in understanding helped parents modify their responses and provide support that was more appropriate to their children's needs.

Theme 2: Negotiating Social Expectations and Family Pressures

Beyond difficulties within the home environment, parents described ADHD as affecting children's participation in peer relationships, school contexts, and wider social environments.

These experiences were particularly significant because children's behaviours were evaluated according to expectations regarding maturity, academic performance, and social competence.

Several parents reported that their children experienced difficulties maintaining peer relationships. Spring explained that although her daughter could easily establish friendships, sustaining these relationships remained challenging:

"She can make friends very quickly, but it is difficult for her to maintain stable friendships. For example, she may make ten friends, but eventually only one or two friendships remain."

(Spring, Interview)

The parent attributed these difficulties to differences in developmental maturity:

"Children of the same age are more mature than her. Although she is nine years old, her psychological maturity is closer to that of a six-year-old child."

(Spring, Interview)

These experiences indicate that social challenges were not only related to children's interaction skills but also to the mismatch between children's developmental characteristics and social expectations.

For some parents, school environments became an important source of concern. Spring described that her decision to seek professional assessment was influenced less by attention difficulties themselves and more by concerns about her daughter's psychological wellbeing:

"What concerned me more was her mental health. At that time, I felt that school experiences were already beginning to affect my daughter's psychological wellbeing."

(Spring, Interview)

Similarly, Yao Wei described how emotional reactions and interpersonal difficulties contributed to his child becoming socially isolated:

"A small conflict would become a huge emotional event for him. He would shout or become angry, and other children gradually felt that they needed to stay away from him. Eventually, he became isolated."

(Yao Wei, Interview)

These accounts suggest that parents experienced ADHD-related challenges within a broader social context. Difficulties were amplified when children struggled to meet expectations regarding classroom behaviour, emotional regulation, and peer relationships.

Family relationships were also affected by different interpretations of ADHD and parenting responsibilities. Spring described disagreement with her husband regarding parenting approaches:

"I believe that I should provide my child with protection and support. However, my husband experienced difficulties in his own childhood, and he tends to respond in a more decisive way, sometimes through emotional distancing."
(Spring, Interview)

The disagreement reflected different beliefs about how children's difficulties should be addressed. While one parent emphasised understanding and emotional support, the other prioritised discipline and behavioural control.

Therefore, parents' experiences involved not only supporting children with ADHD but also negotiating competing expectations from schools, relatives, spouses, and society. ADHD parenting was experienced as a social and relational process rather than an individual family issue.

Theme 3: Experiencing Parenting Stress within Family and Cultural Contexts

Parenting stress emerged as a significant experience across all participants' accounts. Parents described emotional exhaustion, uncertainty, and concerns regarding their children's future development. However, the findings indicate that parental stress was not simply caused by children's ADHD-related behaviours. This reflects the Family Stress Model's emphasis that family stress is shaped by interactions between stressors, family demands, and available resources (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983; Patterson, 2002).

Several parents described the continuous effort required to support their children's daily functioning. Yao Wei explained that parenting a child with ADHD required considerably more time and energy compared with raising typically developing children:

"Raising this one child can sometimes feel more exhausting than raising ten children."
(Yao Wei, Interview)

This statement reflects the intensive nature of ADHD parenting. Parents were not only required to manage children's behaviours but also to provide continuous reminders, emotional support, and supervision in daily activities.

Similarly, parents described frustration caused by the gap between children's intentions and their actual behaviours. Yao Wei explained:

"Sometimes he clearly knows what he should do, but he just cannot carry it out. This creates a lot of frustration because from the outside it looks like he simply does not want to do it."
(Yao Wei, Interview)

This experience illustrates the emotional difficulty parents encountered when children's behaviours did not match their expectations. The challenge was not only completing daily

tasks but also understanding why children who appeared capable were unable to translate knowledge into action.

In addition to practical difficulties, parents experienced emotional pressure related to responsibility and self-evaluation. Some participants questioned whether their parenting approaches had contributed to their children's difficulties. Spring described this internal struggle:

"At that time, I often wondered whether I had not guided her well enough or whether I had been too tolerant."

(Spring, Interview)

This account demonstrates that parenting stress involved feelings of responsibility and self-doubt. Parents did not simply experience stress from managing ADHD symptoms; they also reflected on their own roles as caregivers and questioned whether they had fulfilled expectations of being a "good parent."

Family relationships were another important source of emotional negotiation. Spring described differences between herself and her husband regarding how to respond to their daughter's difficulties:

"My approach was to protect and support my child, but my husband believed that children should experience difficulties and learn from them."

(Spring, Interview)

These different perspectives created tension within the family. While one parent emphasised emotional understanding and acceptance, the other focused more on discipline and resilience.

However, these conflicts also became part of the family adaptation process. Through communication and reflection, parents gradually developed more shared understandings of their children's needs. Spring described how establishing regular family meetings changed interactions within the household:

"After we started having family meetings, everyone felt seen by each other. Our family relationship became much better."

(Spring, Interview)

Participants' experiences showed that parenting stress was closely connected with family interactions and external expectations. Parents described difficulties in balancing different perspectives within the family, responding to children's needs, and managing concerns from schools and wider social environments.

At the same time, some parents reported developing new ways of communicating and cooperating with family members. These changes helped families manage daily challenges and create more supportive environments for children with ADHD.

Theme 4: Reconstructing Parenting Approaches through Learning and Adaptation

Despite experiencing significant challenges, parents demonstrated active efforts to develop adaptive strategies. Participants described seeking professional knowledge, learning about ADHD, adjusting parenting approaches, and creating supportive environments for their children.

A key finding was that coping involved more than simply applying behavioural management techniques. Instead, parents gradually reconstructed their understanding of ADHD and transformed their identities as caregivers.

For example, Spring described how her previous psychological knowledge helped her establish a positive parent–child relationship, but she later realised that additional ADHD-specific strategies were necessary:

“My background in psychology helped me build a good parent–child relationship, but it could not provide such detailed strategies.”

(Spring, Interview)

This account highlights that adaptation required both emotional connection and practical knowledge. Parents recognised that understanding their children emotionally was important, but they also needed specific strategies to support attention regulation, routines, and learning behaviours.

Parents also described actively changing their expectations and communication styles. Spring explained that she learned to adjust her parenting approach according to her daughter’s developmental characteristics:

“I realised that I could not treat her according to her chronological age. I needed to understand her actual developmental level and provide the support she needed.”

(Spring, Interview)

Participants reported that coping involved learning about ADHD, adjusting parenting approaches, improving family communication, and seeking external support.

Another important aspect of adaptation involved seeking support and building family systems. Spring described implementing structured family meetings involving all family members:

“Every week we have a family meeting. We express gratitude, discuss things that need improvement, and spend time playing together as a family.”

(Spring, Interview)

Through these practices, the family developed new communication patterns and strengthened emotional connections. The parent explained:

“We began to feel that we were seen and understood by each other. Since then, our family relationship has become much better.”

(Spring, Interview)

These experiences demonstrate that coping strategies extended beyond managing children's ADHD symptoms. Parents actively reconstructed family interactions and developed new meanings around parenting.

However, participants also identified limitations in available external support. Spring highlighted difficulties in obtaining appropriate educational support:

"The support that is still missing is mainly from schools and society. Everything I can do within the family, I have already tried, but I cannot change what happens at school."

(Spring, Interview)

She further explained:

"Teachers often lack specialised training and do not always understand these children. Schools also do not provide sufficient resources or support."

(Spring, Interview)

Participants described adaptation as a gradual process involving learning, reflection, and changes in parenting practices. Parents reported seeking information, communicating with professionals, and adjusting their expectations according to their children's developmental needs.

However, parents also identified limitations in available external support. Several participants described difficulties obtaining sufficient assistance from schools and wider social systems. Although parents actively developed strategies within the family, they continued to experience challenges when external environments lacked understanding and resources.

Integration of Findings: A Dynamic Process of Parental Adaptation

Across the four themes, the findings demonstrate that parents' experiences followed a dynamic process rather than a series of independent challenges.

Therefore, the four themes should not be understood as isolated categories but as interconnected stages within a broader process of parental adaptation. Figure 1 illustrates how parents moved from initial uncertainty and stress towards greater understanding and adaptive responses through continuous interaction with their children, family members, and wider social environment.

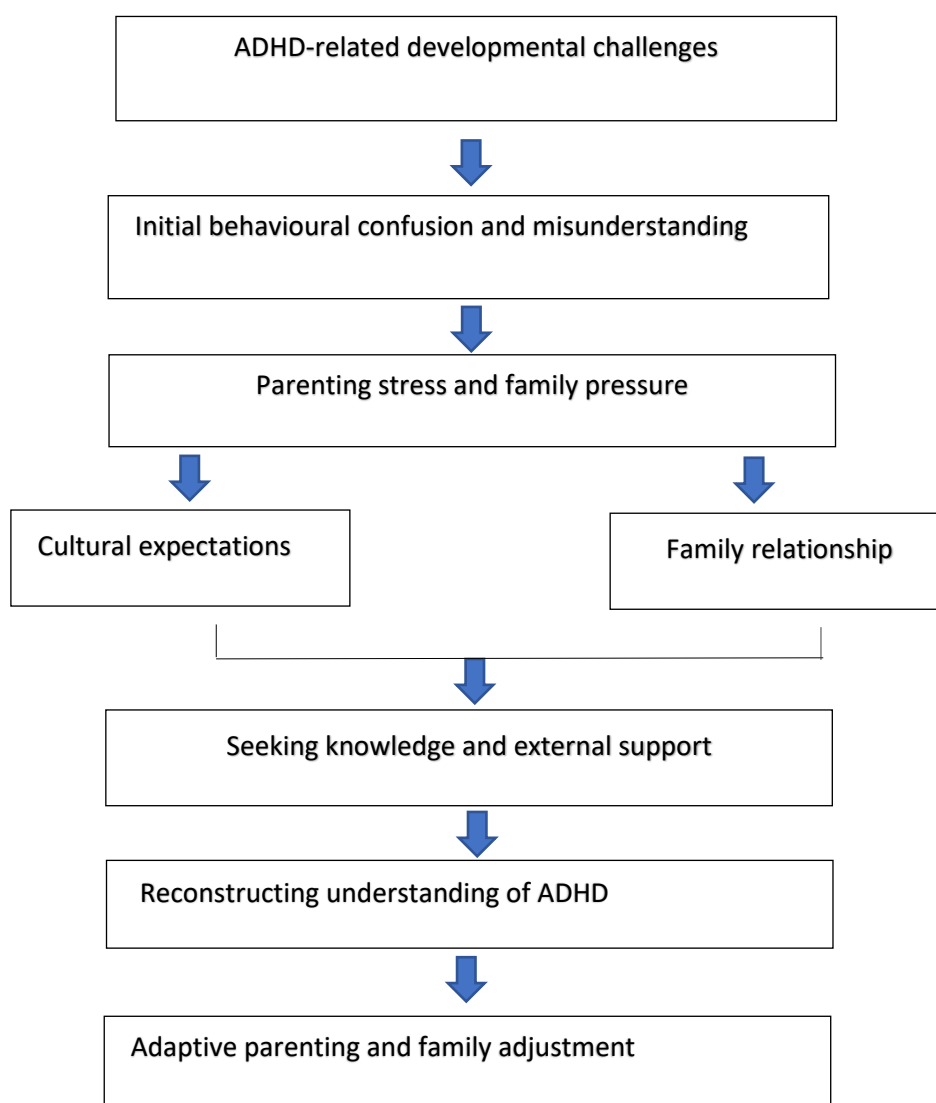
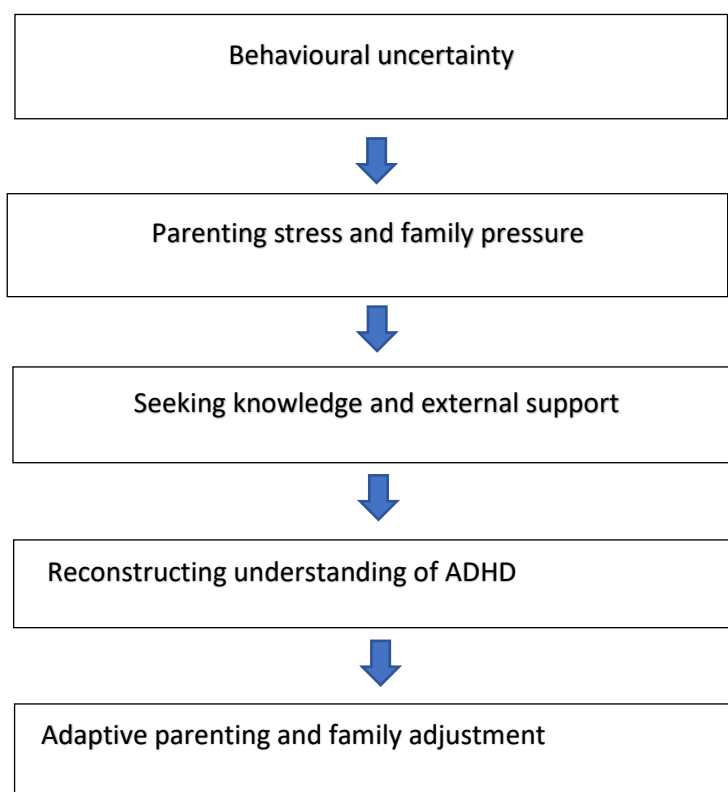


Figure 1. A Dynamic Process of Parental Adaptation among Chinese Parents Raising Children

Initially, parents experienced uncertainty when children's behaviours were difficult to interpret. This uncertainty contributed to emotional stress, self-doubt, and family pressure. As parents gained knowledge and support, they gradually reconstructed their understanding of ADHD and adjusted their expectations. The process can be understood as:



The findings highlight that successful adaptation was not defined by the disappearance of difficulties. Instead, adaptation involved parents developing new ways of understanding their children, responding to challenges, and creating supportive family environments.

In the context of Chinese families, parents' experiences were also shaped by educational expectations, social judgement, and limited institutional support. Therefore, parental adaptation involved continuous negotiation between personal efforts, family relationships, and wider social environments.

Discussion

Interpreting the Findings: A Process of Parental Adaptation

This study explored the lived experiences of parents raising children with ADHD in Tianjin, China, focusing on the challenges they encountered and the strategies they developed to cope with these experiences. Through thematic analysis of four parental interviews, the findings revealed that ADHD parenting was not experienced as a single set of behavioural difficulties but as an ongoing process of interpretation, negotiation, and adaptation.

Four interconnected themes were identified: parents' initial uncertainty in interpreting ADHD-related behaviours, the negotiation of social and family expectations, the experience of parenting stress within broader relational contexts, and the reconstruction of parenting approaches through learning and adaptation.

The findings contribute to existing ADHD parenting research by highlighting that parental adaptation involves more than acquiring knowledge about ADHD or implementing behavioural strategies. Instead, adaptation requires a transformation in how parents understand their children, redefine their parenting roles, and negotiate expectations within family and social contexts.

From Behaviour Management to Meaning Reconstruction: Rethinking ADHD Parenting Experiences

Previous research has consistently identified behavioural difficulties, executive functioning challenges, and emotional dysregulation as major sources of stress for families raising children with ADHD (Bunford et al., 2015; Johnston & Mash, 2001; Theule et al., 2013).

However, the present study extends this understanding by demonstrating that the central challenge experienced by parents was not only managing children's behaviours but also interpreting the meaning behind those behaviours.

Participants initially described experiences of confusion and frustration when their children appeared unable to complete tasks, regulate emotions, or follow instructions despite understanding expectations. These experiences sometimes led parents to question their own parenting abilities or interpret children's behaviours as a lack of motivation.

However, as parents gained knowledge about ADHD, they gradually reconstructed their interpretations. Rather than viewing behaviours as intentional resistance, they developed an understanding of ADHD as involving developmental differences in self-regulation and executive functioning.

This finding suggests that diagnosis represents more than the identification of a clinical condition. For parents, diagnosis can become a process of meaning reconstruction, allowing them to shift from moral interpretations of behaviour towards developmental explanations. This extends previous research by highlighting the psychological transformation involved in ADHD parenting. While existing studies often emphasise parental stress and burden, the present findings demonstrate the importance of understanding how parents cognitively and emotionally reorganise their perceptions of their children over time.

Within the Chinese context, this process may be particularly significant because parenting is often associated with strong expectations regarding children's behaviour, academic achievement, and future success. When children's behaviours do not align with these expectations, parents may experience not only practical difficulties but also concerns regarding their own competence and responsibility as caregivers.

Therefore, parental adaptation involves not simply learning how to manage ADHD symptoms but reconstructing the relationship between parental responsibility and children's developmental characteristics.

Parenting Stress as a Relational and Cultural Experience

The findings also demonstrate that parenting stress among families of children with ADHD should not be understood solely as an individual emotional response to children's symptoms. Instead, stress emerged through interactions between children's difficulties, family relationships, educational expectations, and social evaluations.

Previous research has documented elevated parenting stress among families of children with ADHD (Theule et al., 2013, 2018). However, the current study provides deeper insight into how this stress is produced within everyday family experiences.

Parents described continuous demands related to supervision, emotional regulation support, academic assistance, and communication with schools. These responsibilities created a sense of constant involvement and exhaustion.

Importantly, participants' experiences showed that stress was intensified by social expectations surrounding successful parenting. In the Chinese educational context, children's academic performance and behavioural adjustment are often closely connected with perceptions of family responsibility. Consequently, parents may experience children's difficulties not only as challenges for the child but also as reflections of their own parenting effectiveness.

The findings therefore suggest that parenting stress is culturally embedded. Parents were not simply responding to ADHD symptoms; they were also negotiating expectations from schools, extended family members, and society.

This cultural dimension provides an important contribution to the ADHD parenting literature, which has predominantly developed from Western contexts. By examining Chinese parents' experiences, this study highlights how cultural values related to education, discipline, and family responsibility shape the meaning of ADHD-related challenges.

Coping Strategies as Adaptive Transformation

Previous studies have often conceptualised parental coping in ADHD contexts as the use of practical strategies to reduce stress and manage children's behaviours. While the present study also identified the importance of information seeking, professional support, and behavioural strategies, the findings extend this perspective by demonstrating that coping involved a deeper process of parental transformation.

Participants did not simply learn techniques for managing ADHD-related difficulties. Instead, they gradually changed how they understood their children and reconstructed their roles as parents. This process involved moving from attempts to control children's behaviours towards efforts to understand children's developmental needs and modify the surrounding environment.

For example, parents described how learning about ADHD changed their expectations of their children. Rather than focusing solely on whether children could meet age-based expectations, parents began to consider children's individual developmental characteristics and provide more appropriate support.

This finding contributes to existing literature by suggesting that effective coping among parents of children with ADHD involves both behavioural adaptation and emotional reconstruction. In other words, coping is not only about what parents do but also about how parents make sense of their experiences.

The present study therefore proposes that parental adaptation should be understood as a meaning-making process. Through repeated interactions with their children, professional knowledge, and family experiences, parents gradually developed new interpretations of ADHD and new understandings of successful parenting.

This perspective provides a more nuanced explanation of why some parents are able to move from distress towards adaptation despite continuing challenges. Adaptation does not necessarily mean that difficulties disappear; rather, it reflects parents' increasing ability to respond to difficulties with greater understanding and flexibility.

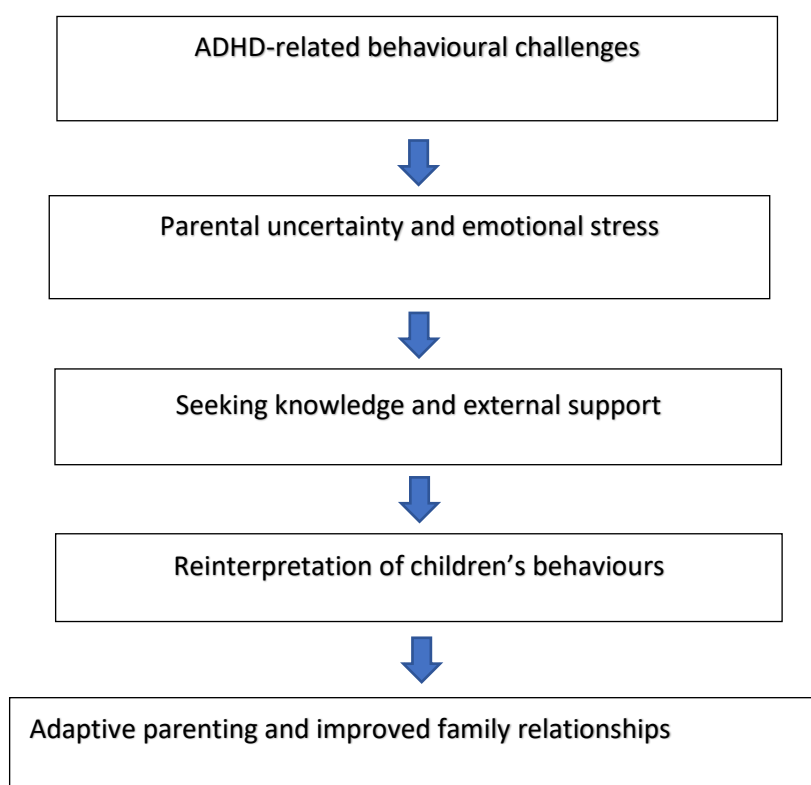
Theoretical Contribution: Contextualising the Family Stress Model in Chinese ADHD Parenting Experiences

The Family Stress Model provides an important framework for understanding how child-related difficulties influence parental stress and family functioning. Consistent with this perspective, the current findings demonstrate that ADHD-related challenges created significant demands for families, contributing to emotional burden, relationship difficulties, and concerns about children's future development.

However, this study enriches the application of the Family Stress Model by highlighting the active role of parental interpretation and adaptation within the Chinese ADHD parenting context.

Traditional stress models often emphasise the relationship between stressors, parental distress, and family outcomes. The present findings suggest that this process is not linear. Parents' interpretations of children's behaviours influenced how stressors were experienced and how families responded to them.

The dynamic adaptation process identified in this study suggests that parental experiences of ADHD are not simply determined by the presence of child-related difficulties. Instead, parents actively reconstruct meanings through interactions among stressors, cultural expectations, available resources, and adaptive responses. Specifically, the findings indicate a dynamic process:



This process demonstrates that parents are not passive recipients of stress. Instead, they actively construct meanings, negotiate expectations, and develop new strategies in response to challenges.

Furthermore, the study contributes a culturally situated understanding of family adaptation. Within Chinese families, adaptation occurred within a context shaped by educational pressure, expectations of parental responsibility, and limited institutional support. Therefore, parental coping cannot be fully understood without considering the social and cultural environment in which families operate.

By integrating parental meaning reconstruction with family stress perspectives, this study provides a more comprehensive explanation of ADHD parenting experiences.

Practical Implications

The findings provide several implications for educational practice, professional support services, and family interventions.

First, the findings highlight the importance of providing parents with ADHD-related psychoeducation that goes beyond symptom recognition. Participants demonstrated that understanding ADHD changed how they interpreted their children's behaviours. Therefore, professional support should help parents recognise the developmental mechanisms underlying ADHD-related difficulties and reduce interpretations based on blame or insufficient discipline.

Second, interventions should address parental emotional experiences. Parents in this study experienced stress not only because of children's behaviours but also because of uncertainty, self-doubt, and social expectations. Family support programmes should therefore include emotional support, opportunities for parental reflection, and strategies for managing stress within family relationships.

Third, schools should develop stronger systems of support for children with ADHD and their families. Participants identified limited teacher understanding, insufficient professional training, and inadequate educational resources as continuing challenges. Schools could provide teacher training related to ADHD, promote inclusive classroom practices, and develop communication mechanisms between educators and families.

Fourth, support should consider the broader family system. The findings demonstrated that parental adaptation was influenced by relationships between spouses and family members. Interventions that encourage collaborative parenting approaches and family communication may help reduce conflict and strengthen family resilience.

Finally, policymakers should recognise that supporting children with ADHD requires cooperation between healthcare, education, and community systems. Parents cannot address all challenges independently within the family environment. Sustainable support requires broader social recognition and institutional resources.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, this study involved four parents from Tianjin, China. Although the qualitative case study approach allowed detailed exploration of parents' lived experiences, the findings cannot be assumed to represent all families raising children with ADHD. Future research could include participants from different regions, socioeconomic backgrounds, and family structures to explore variations in parental experiences.

Second, the study focused primarily on parents' perspectives. Although parents provide essential insights into family experiences, future studies could incorporate multiple perspectives, including children with ADHD, teachers, healthcare professionals, and other family members. Such multi-perspective research may provide a more comprehensive understanding of ADHD-related experiences across contexts.

Third, this study explored parental experiences at a particular point in time. However, the findings suggest that adaptation is an ongoing developmental process. Longitudinal qualitative research could further examine how parents' interpretations, coping strategies, and family relationships change following diagnosis and across different developmental stages.

Future research may also investigate how educational environments and professional support systems influence parental adaptation. Understanding the interaction between family efforts and external support structures may contribute to more effective interventions for children with ADHD and their families.

Conclusion

This study provides a qualitative exploration of how Chinese parents experience and adapt to raising children with ADHD. The findings demonstrate that ADHD parenting involves more than managing children's behavioural difficulties. Instead, parents experience a continuous process of interpretation, emotional adjustment, and adaptation.

The study contributes to ADHD parenting research by demonstrating that parental adaptation involves not only behavioural management but also a process of meaning reconstruction. Parents gradually developed new understandings of their children, their parenting roles, and their responsibilities within specific cultural and educational contexts.

By focusing on Chinese parents' lived experiences, this study highlights that ADHD parenting cannot be fully understood without considering cultural expectations surrounding education, family responsibility, and social judgement. The findings extend existing ADHD family research by illustrating how cultural contexts shape parents' experiences of stress, coping, and adaptation.. The findings suggest that effective support for families should not only provide information about ADHD but also help parents develop confidence, emotional resilience, and supportive relationships with their children.

Ultimately, supporting families of children with ADHD requires moving beyond a focus on individual symptoms towards a more holistic understanding of parenting experiences within family and social systems.

Future support systems should therefore recognise parents not only as caregivers managing children's difficulties but also as active partners whose experiences and adaptation processes influence family wellbeing.

References

- American Psychiatric Association. (2022). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed., text revision). American Psychiatric Publishing.
- Barkley, R. A. (2015). *Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder: A handbook for diagnosis and treatment* (4th ed.). Guilford Press.
- Benzies, K., & Mychasiuk, R. (2009). Fostering family resiliency: A review of the key protective factors. *Child & Family Social Work, 14*(1), 103–114. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2008.00586.x>
- Boss, P. (2002). *Family stress management: A contextual approach*. SAGE Publications.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. SAGE Publications.
- Bunford, N., Evans, S. W., & Wymbs, F. (2015). ADHD and emotion dysregulation among children and adolescents. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review, 18*(3), 185–217. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-015-0187-5>
- Chao, R. K. (1994). Beyond parental control and authoritarian parenting style: Understanding Chinese parenting through the cultural notion of training. *Child Development, 65*(4), 1111–1119. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.1994.tb00806.x>
- Chuang, S. S., & Tamis-LeMonda, C. S. (2013). Gender, culture, and parenting: The influence of culture on parenting beliefs and practices. *Parenting: Science and Practice, 13*(2), 97–118. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295192.2013.756352>
- Faraone, S. V., Asherson, P., Banaschewski, T., Biederman, J., Buitelaar, J. K., Ramos-Quiroga, J. A., Rohde, L. A., Sonuga-Barke, E. J. S., Tannock, R., & Franke, B. (2021). Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. *Nature Reviews Disease Primers, 7*, Article 1. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41572-021-00277-3>
- Fung, H., & Lau, S. (2010). Factors influencing parental beliefs about child development in Chinese families. *Parenting: Science and Practice, 10*(2), 94–112. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295190903212647>
- Hoza, B. (2007). Peer functioning in children with ADHD. *Journal of Pediatric Psychology, 32*(6), 655–663. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jpepsy/jsm024>
- Johnston, C., & Mash, E. J. (2001). Families of children with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder: Review and recommendations for future research. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review, 4*(3), 183–207. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1017592030434>
- Masten, A. S. (2014). *Ordinary magic: Resilience in development*. Guilford Press.
- McCubbin, H. I., & Patterson, J. M. (1983). The family stress process: The Double ABCX Model of adjustment and adaptation. *Marriage & Family Review, 6*(1–2), 7–37. https://doi.org/10.1300/J002v06n01_02
- Mikami, A. Y., Jack, A., Emeh, C. C., & Stephens, H. F. (2010). Parental influence on children with ADHD: Relationships between parenting behaviours and child peer functioning. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology, 38*, 803–815. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10802-010-9413-7>
- Patterson, J. M. (2002). Integrating family resilience and family stress theory. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 64*(2), 349–360. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2002.00349.x>
- Peters, S., Calam, R., & Harrington, R. (2005). Maternal attributions and expressed emotion as predictors of adjustment in children with ADHD. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 46*(6), 618–625. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7610.2004.00395.x>

- Rogers, M., Wiener, J., Marton, I., & Tannock, R. (2009). Supportive parenting and ADHD symptoms: Effects on children's adjustment. *Journal of Attention Disorders*, 13(4), 356–366. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1087054708326119>
- Shaw, P., Stringaris, A., Nigg, J., & Leibenluft, E. (2014). Emotion dysregulation in attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 171(3), 276–293. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ajp.2013.13070966>
- Shek, D. T. L. (2006). Chinese family research: Puzzles, progress, paradigms, and policy implications. *Journal of Family Issues*, 27(3), 275–292. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X05285285>
- Theule, J., Cheung, K., Aberdeen, A., & Dumas, J. E. (2018). Parenting stress in families of children with ADHD: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 27, 1437–1451.
- Theule, J., Wiener, J., Tannock, R., & Jenkins, J. M. (2013). Parenting stress in families of children with ADHD: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 21(1), 3–17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1063426610387433>
- Walsh, F. (2016). *Strengthening family resilience* (3rd ed.). Guilford Press.
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.